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BROWNING'S ATTITUDE TOWARD MIRACLES

by Floyd Ronald Stuart

In the early poem "Pauline" the young Browning avows his "trust in signs / And omens..." (I, 301-302).¹ He sees "God everywhere..." (I, 302). If the word *signs* is interpreted as *miracles*, then the poet regards a miracle in much the same light as does Oscar Hammerstein II's Chinese immigrant girl in *Flower Drum Song*: "A hundred million miracles are happening every day." A more scholarly analogy may be made to Thomas Carlyle's Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, who looks about and sees all creation as miraculous.² In "A Death in the Desert," Browning deals with the miracles of Christ recorded in St. John. The speaker in the poem is Pamphylax, who reports the final words of the dying John, reputedly the last man to see Christ alive. As he is dying, John worries over the fate of Christianity; he is afraid that generations of Christians to come will dogmatize the faith and thereby miss the essential truth, which is the gospel of love (VII, 126-133). Christ performed His miracles in order to demonstrate the power of truth; when truth was secure, miracles were no longer necessary.³ Browning, thus, does not deny the historicity of Christ's miracles, but he seems at no pains to prove their historical factuality. The attitude

¹Robert Browning, *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning* (17 vols.; London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1889). All references to Browning's poetry will be to this edition; documentation will be given within the body of the paper by volume, section or book wherever applicable, and line.

²Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, ed. by Charles Frederick Harrold (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1937), p. 254, n. 3.

³A. Allen Brockington, *Browning and the Twentieth Century: A Study of Robert Browning's Influence and Reputation* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), pp. 189-190. For a discussion of how the John of Browning's poem differs from the John of the New Testament on the matter of Christ's miracles, see Brockington, pp. 189-191.

toward miracles expressed in "A Death in the Desert" is bound up with the poet's reaction against Higher Criticism, a movement which he considered a rationalistic approach to the scriptures. The first extended expression of his antipathy toward the Higher Critics is "Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day."⁴ The speaker in "Christmas-Eve" attends the lecture of a professor who is attempting to rationalize the miraculous nature of Christ:

So, he proposed inquiring first
 Into the various sources whence
 This Myth of Christ is derivable;
 Demanding from the evidence,
 (Since plainly no such life was liveable)
 How these phenomena should class? (V, xv, 16-21)

The professor's objective is to trace Christianity "backward to its prime..." (V, xv, 12). His interest lies in discovering the historical Christ; his approach is that of the objective historian, sifting the evidence to find factual truth about the man Jesus. Skeptical of Christ's divine existence among mortal men ("plainly no such life was liveable"), the professor must find a way to cope with "these phenomena," which in the context of the passage seem to be the rationalist's word for miracles. The speaker, however, will not endure the lecture. In disgust he leaves the lecture-hall. In terms of Browning's attitude toward miracles, the implication of the speaker's exit seems to be a reaction against the rational approach to a subject that is essentially nonrational. He is not concerned with whether a person called Jesus lived in a certain time and place in history; moreover, he seems not really concerned with whether Christ performed authentic miracles. His concern, on the contrary, seems to be with the timeless, transcendent meaning of the acts ascribed to Christ. In short, whether miracles are fact or fable resolves into an academic point of little interest for Browning.

The attitude toward miracles and the miraculous expressed in

⁴William O. Raymond, *The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), pp. 32-33.

"Pauline," "A Death in the Desert," and "Christmas-Eve" provides a fairly wide entrance into the subject of miracles in *The Ring and the Book*. An examination of the significant instances of *miracle* and *miraculous*⁵ and the relevant allusions to Biblical miracles should demonstrate how Browning brings to bear upon the human drama of the famous seventeenth-century murder case the basic attitude toward miracles expressed in the three antecedent poems.

The preponderance of allusions and references to miracles occur in relation to Pompilia. In his study, *The Central Truth*, William Whitla notes the abundance of parallels between Pompilia and the Virgin Mary.⁶ Through a suspension of the ordinary laws of human biology, Mary, according to the Gospels, gave birth to the Savior. In a sense, Pompilia becomes the matrix from which is delivered Caponsacchi, whom Browning places in the roles of two saviors: Saint George (VIII, i, 577-588) and Jesus Christ (VIII, iv, 844-845). Moreover, the birth of Pompilia's own son Gaetano occurs only two weeks before Christmas Eve. Whitla points out the poet's emphasis upon similarities between the coming of her son and the birth of Christ.⁷ In a mockery of the Trinity, Guido, in his first monologue, pleads to the court that he will place at his right hand the child whom his wife bore (IX, v, 2048). Even the circumstances of Pompilia's birth and entry into the Comparini household suggest a parody of a Biblical story containing elements of the miraculous:

Hence, seventeen years ago, conceive his (Pietro's) glee
 When first Violante, 'twixt a smile and blush,
 With touch of agitation proper too,
 Announced that, spite of her unpromising age,
 The miracle would in time be manifest,
 An heir's birth was to happen: and it did.
 (VIII, ii, 219-224)

⁵The word *miracle* or the adjective form appears at least twenty-four times in *The Ring and the Book*. This count excludes Books VIII and IX.

⁶William Whitla, *The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 116.

⁷Whitla, *Central Truth*, p. 106.

Violante, childless and probably having undergone her change of life, has actually bargained with a prostitute for a baby; thus, the miracle of the gift of a child to the senile Pietro is in reality a hoax perpetrated by the scheming Violante. The enormity of the hoax is compounded by the strong parallel between Violante and the barren Elizabeth told about in St. Luke (1: 5-25). Following the bargain with the prostitute, Violante enters church and offers a prayer of thanksgiving:

“My reproof is taken away,
 “And blessed shall mankind proclaim me now. . . .”
 (VIII, iv, 196-197)

Her words are strikingly like Elizabeth's after she has conceived a child: “Thus hath the Lord dealt with me, in the days wherein he looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among men” (Luke 1: 25). Browning here seems to be at work on multiple levels of irony. First, on the most literal level, the miracle is no miracle at all, but a trick played upon Pietro by his wife, second, the parallel between Violante and Elizabeth is a grim burlesque on the passage from Luke; and third, in view of her destiny as the instrument of Caponsacchi's deliverance into heroism, Pompilia's birth is, after all, a miracle.

The miraculous nature of Pompilia is seen dramatically in the circumstances of her death. Stabbed twenty-two times by Guido's dagger, she miraculously lives on some four days—long enough to name her murderer, vindicate herself and Caponsacchi, make provision for Gaetano's future, absolve Pietro and Violante of guilt, and even pardon Guido. The poem contains at least six separate attestations to the fact that her continued life is nothing short of a miracle. The romantic bachelor Other Half-Rome makes three of the attestations (VIII, iii, 1-7, 26-34, 51-57). *Tertium Quid*, purporting to represent a third point of view in the case, and the narrator of Book I each make one (VIII, iv, 1425-1441; VIII, i, 1076-1080); and even Guido, in his second monologue, marvels that

[f]our whole days did Pompilia keep alive
 With the best surgery of Rome agape
 At the miracle. . . . (X, xi, 1690-1692)

In his third attestation, *Other Half-Rome* describes the healing grace which some of the Roman mobs ascribe to Pompilia as she lies upon her deathbed:

Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,
Swears—but that, prematurely trundled out
Just as she felt the benefit begin,
The miracle was snapped up by somebody,—
Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life
At touch o' the bedclothes merely,—how much more
Had she but brushed the body as she tried!
(VIII, iii, 51-57)

Old Monna Baldi undoubtedly belongs to that class of people whom Guido, in his second monologue, caustically characterizes as “miracle-mongers” (X, xi, 707). They crowd into Saint Anna's, where Pompilia lies dying, hoping to touch her body, or even her bedclothes, believing that the mere touch will miraculously heal their infirmities. The parallel to the healing power in the hem of Christ's garment is strongly suggested (Luke 8: 41-48).

This parallel embodies several important implications regarding Browning's attitude toward miracles. First, the parallel may be one technique which he uses to characterize *Other Half-Rome* as one who tends to “gush” over the more sensational aspects of Pompilia's death; and, second, it may be true that the poet, like Guido, is satirizing those morbid individuals who converge upon a bloody tragedy, attaching vague supernatural knowledge or powers to one who may linger between life and death. Browning's main purpose, however, seems otherwise. The brief discussion of “A Death in the Desert” and “Christmas-Eve” was intended to establish the premise that the poet's interest lies not in proving the historical fact or fable of miracles, but in extracting the essence of the miracles as they are related in the New Testament. Whether they actually happened seems rather beside the point. *The Ring and the Book*, however, is all about distinguishing between fact and fable: the importance of facts must not be underestimated;

but the Pope, voicing Browning's own philosophy,⁸ illustrates the principle that facts methodically collected and painstakingly analyzed by logical process do not add up to truth. The achievement of ultimate Fact is not by reason, but by intuition. Thus, Other Half-Rome's report that Old Monna Baldi's "palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life / At touch o' the bedclothes merely..." (VIII, iii, 55-56) is not an item which Browning feels compelled to prove or disprove. His concern is with the universal meaning, which transcends the time and place in history of Pompilia.

That Pompilia herself, whose intellectual powers are limited by her young age and by her illiteracy, should believe in miracles is altogether convincing. Caponsacchi stirs up ambiguous emotions in her, perhaps even romantic attraction, but clearly she regards his response to her need as a miracle:

"You serve God specially, as priests are bound,
 "And care about me, stranger as I am,
 "So far as wish my good,—that miracle
 "I take no intimate He wills you serve
 "By saving me. . . ." (IX, vii, 1429-1433)

She moreover, is not alone in viewing Caponsacchi's service as miraculous. The priest himself uses the word *miracle* in the context of his response to Pompilia's plea. In his address to the court, he pointedly states:

Pompilia spoke, and I at once received,
 Accepted my own fact, my miracle. . . .
 (IX, vi, 918-919)

Then, with great eloquence he relates the moment that he recognizes that in answering Pompilia's plea lies the promise of his own salvation:

⁸Norton B. Crowell, *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge* (Albuquerque, New Mexico) The University of New Mexico Press, 1963), pp. 32-33.

This new thing that had been struck into me
 By the look o' the lady,—to dare disobey
 The first authoritative word. 'Twas God's.
 I had been lifted to the level of her,
 Could take such sounds into my sense. I said,
 "We two are cognizant o' the Master now;
 "She it is bids me bow the head; how true,
 "I am a priest! I see the function here;
 "I thought the other way self-sacrifice:
 "This is the true, seals up the perfect sum.
 "I pay it, sit down, silently obey."
 (IX, vi, 1011-1021)

The moment of recognition is apocalyptic, revealing to him the opportunity to act on earth—quite outside the Church—as the agent of divine love.⁹

Three other speakers testify to the miracle of Pompilia's and Caponsacchi's recognition of their need for each other: Other Half-Rome, the Pope, and the narrator of Book I. Other Half-Rome describes the mutual recognition as a "critical flash" (VIII, iii, 1045). He suggests that Caponsacchi, like Christ, is "predestinate to save" (VIII, iii, 1044). Christ perished in order to save sinning man. In Pompilia, the priest sees in a moment of illumination "[h]is need of...a woman to perish for..." (VIII, iii, 1047). Although Pompilia can hardly be equated with sinning man, she is surely in need of salvation from a situation fraught with sin. The Pope, though less prone than Other Half-Rome to romanticize the meeting of the pair, nevertheless implies that the recognition transpires on a level above logical explanation. The place of their recognition will never be consecrated as holy ground, but "there is passion in the place..." (X, x, 661). Although in the particular passage now under consideration the Pope is indicating the ambiguity of the married woman's appealing to the priest for help, the Christian overtones of suffering in the word *passion* must not be overlooked. In a

⁹Whitla, *Central Truth*, p. 124.

sense, Caponsacchi does suffer the death of his life as a fop-priest in order to save Pompilia; and just as Christ came into a world that denied Him, so the world will not recognize the greatness of Caponsacchi's deed (X, x, 667-673).

The narrator of Book I sees the rescue as evidence of God's intervention in earthly affairs. Although he does not use the word *miracle*, the imagery produces the effect of the miraculous. The emergence of the priest as Pompilia's savior is accompanied by the "cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash..." (VIII, i, 583). The narrator's assignation of a miraculous quality to the rescue seems consistent with the poet's overall attitude toward miracles. Despite the fact that Browning is not dealing directly with the historical validity of miracles, he is interested in showing that human experience may still contain the essential truth of miracles, that is, that all experience is not explainable by man's intellection.

At least five uses of *miracle* or *miraculous* occur in connection with Guido. Two have already been noted (X, xi, 707, 1692). His own use of the word operates on the level of deliberate irony intended to sharpen his bitter attitude toward his failure to receive ecclesiastical preferment (IX, v, 268-295), his doubts about the paternity of his wife's child (IX, v, 1628-1643), and his disbelief in the purity of the relationship between Pompilia and the priest (VIII, iv, 989-1042). Concerning Browning's attitude toward miracles, however, Guido's uses of the word are not so important as the Pope's and Pompilia's allusions to the possibility of a miracle touching Guido's life. The moribund Pompilia, having passed into a state of beautitude, feels that her husband is not beyond redemption:

In His face
Is light, but in His shadow healing too:
Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed!
(IX, vii, 1720-1722)

The redemption of which she speaks is the miracle of Christ's saving grace, from which the Pope himself does not preclude

Guido. Like a flash of lightning, which the Pope once witnessed in Naples, Guido may be saved:

For the main criminal I have no hope
 Except in such a suddenness of fate.
 I stood at Naples once, a night so dark
 I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
 Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all:
 But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
 Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
 Through her whole length of mountain visible:
 There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
 And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
 So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
 And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.
 (X, x, 2117-2128)

Pompilia's murderer dies "‘with the name of Jesus on his lips...’" (X, xii, 189). Whether in the instant of which the Pope speaks Guido has truly seen the truth and has been saved is a moot question. The issue is that the miracle of salvation is possible for him. In relation to the question of his salvation, however, is an incident which the Venetian visitor tells in the early parts of Book XII:

"Now did a beggar by Saint Agnes, lame
 "From his youth up, recover use of leg,
 "Through prayer of Guido as he glanced that way.
 ..." (X, xii, 159-161)

It is true, of course, that the speaker is biased in favor of Guido, and it is also possible that the so-called healing is effected temporarily in the lame beggar by the emotional tension of the moment; but at face value the healing incident here provides an interesting analogue to the partial cure produced in Old Monna Baldi by her contact with Pompilia's bedclothes (VIII, iii, 55-56).

If Guido, therefore, has seen the truth, then a miracle has touched his life, for the truth itself is a miracle. Indeed, *The*

Ring and the Book emerges as Browning's affirmation that facts alone do not yield the truth. Although the poet is not concerned per se with the historicity of miracles, he is interested in applying the essence of miracles to the human drama of the seventeenth-century murder case. He provides twelve books of facts relevant to the case, but the facts alone do not yield the truth about the principal figures, Guido, Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope. Man can aspire to know the truth only through a faculty higher than his ability to gather facts. Pompilia and Caponsacchi do not realize their need of each other through their powers of reason; the Pope does not reach his decision through intellectual process alone. *Tertium Quid* makes a major statement regarding the priest's decision to rescue Pompilia: "the truth was felt by instinct here..." (VIII, iv, 1006). The Pope judges ultimately through his instinct. For Browning, man's instinct yields the truth; and whenever the truth touches human experience, the contact is miraculous.